

# Vatican buries the hatchet with Charles Darwin

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Richard Owen in Rome

The Vatican has admitted that Charles Darwin was on the right track when he claimed that Man descended from apes.

A leading official declared yesterday that Darwin's theory of evolution was compatible with Christian faith, and could even be traced to St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. "In fact, what we mean by evolution is the world as created by God," said Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, head of the Pontifical Council for Culture. The Vatican also dealt the final blow to speculation that Pope Benedict XVI might be prepared to endorse the theory of Intelligent Design, whose advocates credit a "higher power" for the complexities of life.

Organisers of a papal-backed conference next month marking the 150th anniversary of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* said that at first it had even been proposed to ban Intelligent Design from the event, as "poor theology and poor science". Intelligent Design would be discussed at the fringes of the conference at the Pontifical Gregorian University, but merely as a "cultural phenomenon", rather than a scientific or theological issue, organisers said.

The conference is seen as a landmark in relations between faith and science. Three years ago advocates of Intelligent Design seized on the Pope's reference to an "intelligent project" as proof that he favoured their views.

Conceding that the Church had been hostile to Darwin because his theory appeared to conflict with the account of creation in Genesis, Archbishop Ravasi argued yesterday that biological evolution and the Christian view of Creation were complementary.

Marc Leclerc, who teaches natural philosophy at the Gregorian University, said that no scholar could "remain indifferent" to the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth tomorrow. There was, however, "no question of celebrating" it.

The Vatican would "take the measure of an event, which has left its mark for ever on the history of science and has influenced the way we understand our humanity". The "time has come for a rigorous and objective valuation" of Darwin by the Church, he said.

Professor Leclerc said that too many opponents of Darwin – above all Creationists – had mistakenly claimed that his theories were "totally incompatible with a religious vision of reality", as did proponents of Intelligent Design.

Darwin's theories had never been formally condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, Monsignor Ravasi insisted. His rehabilitation had begun as long ago as 1950, when Pius XII described evolution as a valid scientific approach to the development of humans. In 1996 John Paul II said that it was "more than a hypothesis".

Father Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, Professor of Theology at the Pontifical Santa Croce University in Rome, said that Darwin had been anticipated by St Augustine of Hippo. The 4th-century theologian had "never heard the term evolution, but knew that big fish eat smaller fish" and that forms of life had been transformed "slowly over time". Aquinas had made similar observations in the Middle Ages, he added.

He said it was time that theologians as well as scientists grappled with the mysteries of genetic codes and "whether the diversification of life forms is the result of competition or cooperation between species". As for the origins of Man, although we shared 97 per cent of our "genetic inheritance" with apes, the remaining 3 per cent "is what makes us unique", including religion.

"I maintain that the idea of evolution has a place in Christian theology," Professor Tanzella-Nitti added.

Creationism remains powerful in the US, however, notably among Protestants, and its followers object to evolution being taught in state schools.

The Church of England is seeking to bring Darwin back into the fold with a page on its website paying tribute to his "forgotten" work in his local parish, to illustrate how science and Church need not be at odds. Several pages celebrate Darwin's "significant scientific progress" to mark his bicentenary and also the 150th anniversary of *On the Origin of Species*.

The Church wants to correct the impression that Darwin's relationship with Anglicanism was contentious. The Anglican Church as a whole did not condemn Darwin or his beliefs. It says that although he lost his faith, he did not become antiChurch or antireligious.

